
Nutrition and Cancer-Related Fatigue

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is usually described as lacking energy and feeling weak, exhausted or tired. General fatigue with cancer can be caused by a number of problems, including:

- The cancer itself
- Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, bone marrow transplant or surgery
- Side effects of treatment such as anemia, nausea, vomiting, pain, insomnia and mood changes
- Emotions such as anxiety or depression
- Medications, particularly pain relievers
- Poor nutrition
- Lack of exercise



Fatigue should be discussed with your doctor. Don't keep it a secret. Some causes of fatigue can be improved by lifestyle changes or medical interventions.

One way to decrease fatigue is through a healthy diet. When a person has cancer, changes can occur in the body that alter the need for and ability to process nutrients. These changes can lead to poor nutrition and can result in fatigue. Some changes in diet may be helpful to combat these changes.

Nutrition Tips for Decreasing Fatigue

- Try to eat 4 to 6 small meals per day
- Prepare easy to chew foods
- Include high protein foods at every meal to help improve immunity. Examples include:
 - Eggs, meat, beans, milk and dairy products, soy, peanut butter
- Include iron-rich foods at that will help with anemia, including:
 - Egg yolks, lean meats, liver, whole grain breads and cereals
- Include vitamin C foods to help your body absorb iron, including:
 - Citrus fruits, bananas, avocados, peaches, melons, strawberries, tomatoes and broccoli
- Drink plenty of fluid throughout the day to avoid dehydration



Meal Preparation Tips for Decreasing Fatigue:

- Try canned, frozen or other prepared convenience foods.
- Take advantage of the microwave to cook or re-heat prepared foods.
- When feeling well enough, prepare extra portions and freeze in smaller containers to eat on days when you are tired.
- Order take-out foods. Choose healthier options such as salads, wraps and grilled or baked foods when looking at menu options.
- Ask health care professionals about community resources that deliver prepared meals.
- Allow family and friends to help with meal preparation or bring meals and snack foods to you.
- Keep easy-to-grab snacks on hand.

Other Ways to Decrease Fatigue

- Make time for rest and take short naps when needed.
- Don't stay up too late; try to keep a good bedtime and morning wake-up routine.
- Avoid too much caffeine, which can interfere with a good night's sleep.
- Avoid excessive alcohol, which may interfere with sleep and interact with medical treatments.
- Avoid boredom. Keep engaged in social and productive activities such as hobbies or volunteering in other interests that you enjoy.

For any additional nutrition questions, please contact your VA dietitian.

